

## The Baptism of the Lord, Year C

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

Ps 104

Titus 2:11-14, 3:4-7

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Several years ago my housemates and I were hosting a little prayer gathering, and someone arrived that I didn't recognise, so I welcomed him and was about to introduce myself... when I realised that I *did* know him – indeed, he was one of our regular guests. The reason I was caught off guard was because, whereas before he had had a full head of flowing hair, now his head was completely shaved. After recovering from the shock of realising who it was, I asked him what had caused him to do such a thing. It turns out that it was a gift to his mother. She was soon going to be losing her hair as she underwent treatment for cancer, and so he decided to shave off his hair out of love for her, as a sign of solidarity with her in her illness.

I'm sure most of you know of stories similar to this. It is a basic instinct of human nature to want to help someone in need, and one of the best helps we can give is to show solidarity with them. This is all-the-more true, of course, when the one in need is someone we love deeply, and when the difficulty they are facing is something beyond our power. We want to save them, but we can't – and so instead we do our best to show them that we are there for them, in solidarity with them as they face their trial.

In today's feast we recall how, to the surprise of all, Jesus showed up at the river Jordan to be baptised. The account in Luke's Gospel that we heard today is quite concise, but in Matthew's account we hear how this caught the gathered crowd off guard, including John the Baptist. John's baptism was a sign of the desire for repentance – an acknowledgement of the fact that one had committed serious sins and needed to make a change in life. Not just a minor change either – his baptism signified a symbolic death and rebirth. When the individual walked into the water, the old person died, and when they came out, a new person was born. John knows that Jesus doesn't need this kind of baptism, because he is without sin. And so he tells him, "I should be baptised by you!"

Jesus's response in Matthew's Gospel is interesting. He says, "Leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that righteousness demands". In other words, Jesus says, "This is what God wants... and you'll see why in a moment." Jesus, though sinless himself, has come to show his solidarity with sinful mankind. Though he is God-made-Man, his first public act is not to teach or to preach or to work a miracle, but to show us that he understands our brokenness, our sinfulness, and our desire to be transformed. He stands in solidarity with us, because he loves us more than any human love imaginable.

Now, if that was all that Jesus's baptism signified—God's closeness to us in our spiritual dysfunction—then maybe it would simply be an interesting footnote in the story of his life. But as we know, something else happens – the heavens are opened, the Holy Spirit descends, and a voice declares, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Jesus has come into our world not just as a sign of God's solidarity with us, but as our Saviour, the one who will free us from sin. When we stand in solidarity with someone, we do so as a sign of love and support; but often we can't really help them, we can't rescue them from what afflicts them. But our God is not so powerless – his solidarity is of a different nature. In his baptism, Jesus shows us not just God's closeness—his sympathy with our sinful humanity—but he also reveals the very means by which he will rescue us from that sinfulness.

Sometimes perhaps we think of baptism as just a ritual of welcoming, a ceremony of bringing someone new to the Church. Maybe this is because we generally baptise children, and we probably have a hard time thinking of children as being guilty of much sinfulness (joke about some of the kids I've met?). But this mindset is incomplete. It's true that baptism is the sacrament that welcomes us into the Church, the gateway by which we begin to share in the Church's life. But there is also a real and essential transformation that takes place in every baptism, a true liberation from sin – both the sins we have committed personally and also, as in the case of a newborn, the basic state of spiritual dysfunction that we call Original Sin, which we inherit as part of our fallen human nature.

John the Baptist offered a baptism that was only symbolic – it pointed to and represented a change in life, but it couldn't actually bring that change about. However, in the baptism that Christ gave—the sacrament we celebrate to this day—God does what no human power ever could – he gives us rebirth in grace and a share in the identity of the Son. Through baptism, we participate in Jesus's dying and rising again, so that like him we are able to call upon God as his beloved sons and daughters.

Of course, this should be more than just a theoretical thing for us. I wonder how much we actually recognise the significance of our own baptisms. Do we know on what day we were baptised? Do we celebrate on that day? Maybe we should. One of my favourite stories about St John Paul II is when a journalist asked him what was the greatest day of his life. Perhaps the journalist expected this great figure to say it was the day on which he was ordained a priest, or made a bishop, or elected pope; but no, John Paul said, “The day of my baptism.” When he visited Poland in 1979, a few months after he had been elected as pope, he went to Wadowice—the town where he grew up—and the first thing he did was go into the church, go straight to the baptismal font, kneel down and kiss it. St John Paul II knew the power of baptism – he knew that that day was the font from which everything else in his life had flowed. I would humbly suggest that you and I should strive to have the same reverence and gratitude for our own baptisms, even it was many years ago; even if we have no memory of it.

In the waters of the Jordan, God revealed Jesus to be his “beloved Son,” and in the waters of our baptisms, he has made us sharers in that same identity. Of course, the friendship that we have with God through our baptism doesn’t make all of our problems go away or solve all of our struggles. We still will face trials and difficulties and illness and sorrow, and life at times may truly seem more of a cross than a joy. But through it all, God stands in solidarity with us, and—more than that—has opened for us the way of salvation. He gives us the possibility of divine grace here and now, and when this life ends, he calls us to receive the gift of his everlasting friendship in the life to come.

A year or so after that friend of mine showed solidarity with his mother by cutting off all of his hair, her illness worsened and she eventually died. It was, of course, devastating for him and for his family. And yet, in their grief, they took heart. Because their mother had shared in the death of Christ through her baptism, they have a firm hope that, in the fulness of time, she will share in his Resurrection, when there will be no more sorrow or pain, and every tear is wiped away. In the end, this is *our* hope too, or at least it should be – the greatest hope any of us can have, and the only thing in the end that truly matters.